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ABSTRACT

A study investigated gender differences in language use in electronic mail discussion groups. A review of research on discourse analysis identifies areas in which gender differences are found in interpersonal interaction and language use in general, and how these reflect differences in socialization. Research on electronic discussion groups suggests this is a fruitful area for testing assumptions about gender differences because there is no direct discourse interference and gender of interlocutors is irrelevant to the topic or interaction. Data were drawn from 82 electronic-mail (e-mail) messages randomly collected from varied e-mail groups, and analyzed for language indicators representing "female" and "male" styles and for functional gender-related markers of on-line style. Gender of the e-mail senders was known, and reflects accurately the proportion of male and female participants in electronic discussion groups. Findings concerning language patterns are summarized. It is concluded that there are gender differences in e-mail message style, with males tending toward a more aggressive, competitive style and women tending toward a more supportive approach. Message excerpts and data summaries are appended. (MSE)

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"Gender Issues on the Information Highway: An Analysis of Communication Styles in Electronic Discussion Groups."

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This paper examines the implications of gender differences on language use in electronic mail discussion groups. In order to arrive at an analysis of gender-related language differences in this medium, this paper will first draw on more general gender concerns.

Language, culture and society interact to give members of different genders different levels of power and recognition in society. In the Western culture, especially that of North America, the cultural norm, and thus the social standard, is regulated in accordance to the values of men. This form of cultural maintenance and perpetuation, in many ways, has worked to empower the male gender while relegating the female gender to a secondary status in society. From this perspective, the different ways women and men are socialized in their childhood in our society can (and has) serve(d) to empower men while disempowering women in cross-sex interactions, putting them one step below men.

The different way boys and girls are socialized has significant ramifications on the way they communicate as adults because this encoding of social behavior is carried on into adulthood. In other words, it is consistently reflected in the different social and communicative styles of women and men. According to Tannen (1995:138), "communication isn't as simple as saying what you mean. How you say what you mean is crucial, and differs from one person to the next, because using language is a learned behavior: how we talk and listen are deeply influenced by cultural expectations". Women and men are like people who have grown up in two subcultures - they have two broad different styles of speaking and establishing social status.

In North America, as children, we learn ways of speaking from our parents, siblings, teachers, and especially peers while growing up. In the process of socializing with peers, children generally tend to play with other children of the same gender, resulting in different ways of creating rapport and negotiating status within their group: childhood play is where much of our conversational style is learned (Tannen, 1995:138). The main distinction between the way boys and girls communicate is that girls generally use the language to negotiate closeness - that is, to establish intimacy as a basis of friendship (collaboration-oriented); and, in comparison, boys generally use language to negotiate their status in the group (competition-oriented).

Girls, therefore, are more likely to phrase their preferences as suggestions, appearing to give others options in deciding what to do. They downplay ways of bettering one over the other and emphasize ways in which they are all the same. So girls learn to talk in ways that balance their own needs with those of others - in a sense, a way of saving face (Tannen, 1995:140). Goodwin's study (Tannen, 1991:100) of girls making glass rings out of bottles on the streets of Philadelphia showed that girls make suggestions like: "Let's go get more bottles", using this language to include others thus creating solidarity between the interlocutors.

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Boys, on the other hand, tended to use language to negotiate status in the group by demonstrating their own abilities and knowledge, and by challenging others and resisting challenges: "Give me those pliers!"

The theme of using power to negotiate status by males and cooperation to establish rapport by females is consistently played out throughout adulthood and repeated in the social and linguistic communicative styles between the two sexes at all levels: at home, work, meetings, social occasions, and in personal, casual and formal contacts. Consequently women and men tend to have different habitual ways of saying what they mean.

This difference has been the focus of numerous studies and debates - especially in the context of cross-sex interactions where the more aggressive, competitive male style is seen to dominate and suppress the more cooperative, negotiating female style resulting in a power unbalance in favor of the male gender.

On the lexical level, Wardhaugh (1986:305) notes that "one of the consequences of such documentations is that there is now a greater awareness in some parts of the community that subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, distinctions are made in the vocabulary choice used to describe men and women", and that this serves to "draw our attention to existing inequities" and encourages us to make necessary changes.

Lakoff in Fasold (1990:105) is quoted as concluding that language typically used by women has the effect "of submerging [women's] personal identity" because "they are denied the means of expressing themselves strongly," - being that strong expletives are considered un-ladylike - "encouraged to use expressions that express triviality," - and, this writer would add, limited to topics that are 'judged' as trivial - "and to use forms that express uncertainty concerning what they are talking about" - as in the given example: "Howard wouldn't do such a thing, would he?"

Fasold (1990:104) summarizes these differences in the following contrast:

Husband: *"When will dinner be ready?"*
Wife : *"Around six o'clock?"*

and

Wife : *"What time are we leaving for our trip tomorrow?"*
Husband: *"At six o'clock, and everybody better be here."*

In addition, in conversations between men and women, "most researchers agree that men speak more than women do" (Wardhaugh, 1986:308) and that "men frequently interrupt women" but not viceversa, as well as the tendency of men to explain things to women, and in doing so patronizing them, whereas women tend to apologize to men more often. (308)

The two sexes also have different views of language strategies which leads to much misunderstanding: for example, "the mhmm a woman uses quite frequently means only 'I'm listening,' whereas the mhmm a man uses, but much less frequently, tends to mean 'I'm agreeing.' (308); as well as women viewing "questions as a part of conversation maintenance and men primarily as requesting information." (308)

Poynton (1989:28) points out that the "consequences of such differences are enormous", and that while noting that these "differences in verbal strategies and different interpretations of the same strategies lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretation", women are the obvious losers in that their conversational goals and strategies are consistently devalued by males and in that in interaction with males they regularly suffer the indignities of being talked over and at (even sometimes when talking about their own areas of

expertise) and having their use of talk to explore issues, personalities, and decision making as requests for instant problem solving.

Poynton (1989:69-74) goes on to list 28 points resulting from the different female/male styles which express the different language strategies used in the English language by women and men. Most of these tend to focus on oral/aural differences in language use: interruption, back-channel noises (yeah, I see), mood choices (question tags), intonation, and other phonological variants, while some refer also to a written mode of communication.

In particular, Poynton states that women would tend to include more modals (would, might, must); modal adverbs (probably, possibly, certainly); interpersonal metaphors (I think, I suppose) and more 'polite' expressions (I was wondering if you could possibly); as well as less direct commands or statements. In addition, Poynton claims that there might be cause to think that women produce longer sentences than men (to avoid interruption, perhaps); use more evaluative adjectives (wonderful, gorgeous), adjectives of approximation (about, around), and intensifiers (so, very); as well as favor direct quotations rather than paraphrasing.

An appropriate forum in which to consider these assumptions would be one in which there is no interference in the form of interruptions, oral/aural markers, restrictions of topics or any sort of physical contact. One where both genders are welcome and encouraged to participate in the topic at hand: a forum where the gender of the contributors is irrelevant and can only be discerned by the voluntary addition of a name by the participant. Such a forum would be electronic mail discussion groups, also called electronic mailing lists. (Shea: 1994, 26)

Electronic mail discussion groups exist in the tens of thousands on every possible topic imaginable. These are groups of people - some groups in excess of 35,000 participants - who for the most part never physically meet. They communicate with one another through e-mail, offering opinions and advice with regards to the topic at hand. Part of the great success of e-mail discussion groups has been the fact that participants must actually subscribe in order to be able to post their messages, therefore practically eliminating the disturbances created in Usenet groups (no subscription required) where anyone could post anything to any list. (Shea: 1994, 26)

Another cause for the enthusiastic growth of e-mail discussion is the format of the messages and the relaxed style of writing required. Along a continuum with the two extremities marked relaxed spoken language and formal written language, e-mail postings would most probably rank the closest to spoken language than any other written text. In fact, e-mail is often written as if the message were spoken out with few attempts to edit the text at all - and writing e-mail messages back and forth is often referred to as "holding a conversation online." (Shea: 1994, 35).

And while the Internet has historically been more welcoming to males than females, Pittaway (1997:1-2) has found that in 1996 "estimates say 40 to 49 percent of online users are female, up from just 10 percent" in 1993. Adding that "65 percent of women live in households where a personal computer was purchased" between 1995 and 1997. It is clear, therefore, that there is no more a great gender gap in computer mediated communication. According to the results of the surveys published by Pittaway, of the 17.6 million people using Internet e-mail in the United States and Canada, just under half would probably be women.

One can only expect there be a noticeable difference in the language used to discuss issues online - in fact an absence of such differences would be surprising when one considers the different upbringing and consequent socialization and integration of individuals of both sexes in society.

In fact, Herring (1994:introduction) claims that "men and women have recognizably different styles in posting to the Internet" and that "women and men have different communicative ethics"; in contrast to the understanding that the Internet provides a gender-less, age-less, race-less and any-other-bias - less opportunity for interaction. (Shea: 1994, 40)

In the keynote speech at the American Library Association annual convention in 1994, Herring (1994:3-4) proposes that this is the case in that "women and men have different characteristic online styles" that echo the differences of culturization and integration into society: "The male style is characterized by adversiality - put-downs, strong, often contentious assertions, lengthy and/or frequent postings, self-promotion, and sarcasm"; while the female style, in contrast, is characterized by "supportiveness and attenuation" with expressions of appreciation, thanking, and community-building; as well as apologizing, expressing doubt, asking questions, and contributing ideas in the form of suggestions."

It would therefore appear that even though the Internet does offer the theoretical opportunity of equality, in reality women are not provided with an equal opportunity for discussion due to the different communication styles existing between the two sexes - in other words, if women use language that is considered weaker, more frivolous or somewhat less powerful than men, they will continue to be relegated to secondary status by men; and that if men use a more aggressive, competitive, dominating style, they will continue to remain in power.

Or could it be that as people adapt to the virtual societies of computer communication this female/male dichotomy is no longer valid, and that individuals of both sexes are enabled to choose between both styles at their leisure depending on what their purpose is? Could males adopt a more cooperative style of writing if their goal was to secure group support and understanding? And could females opt to write in a more traditionally male style to gain prominence and successfully 'win' an argument?

Hence the writer of this paper has undergone a project of informal research into the different styles women and men adopt when contributing to e-mail discussion groups. Over the span of the third and fourth weeks of May 1997, a total of 100 e-mail messages were randomly collected from a variety of e-mail groups spanning the following topics: bird watching, politics, auto racing, single parent issues, martial arts, teaching English as a second language, dog training, women's basketball, fire fighting, ecology, vegetarianism, computer aided software engineering, gardening, civil rights, and women's religion.

Two separate analyses were undertaken: firstly these messages were analyzed for language indicators representing 'male' and 'female' styles according to the points by Poynton (1989:69-74) which were presented above; and secondly, the messages were analyzed for the more functional markers of 'female' and 'male' online styles presented by Herring (1994:3-4) above.

While the data collected for this modest research is presented attached to this paper, there could be certain factors which affect the results. First of all, the only way the gender of the writer could be determined was through the name placed at the end of the message - therefore 18 messages signed with neutral gender names were discarded (eg. Jamie, or PK), and there is no guarantee that the signature represents the actual gender of the writer (Paul could sign off as Paula, should he wish to). Secondly, a random selection of 82 messages does not provide a large enough sampling when compared to the thousands of messages produced daily.

Thirdly, with regard to the analysis according to the points by Herring (1994:3-4), this researcher is of the male gender and therefore might be biased when considering whether a certain part of a message be classified as 'aggressive' or not. And fourthly, no provision was made to monitor whether the message was

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in response to a woman or a man, a stranger or an acquaintance. In addition, to protect the privacy of the writers, their addresses of origin were removed once their gender was determined; all messages were perceived to have been written by people of native English proficiency, and, while not the object of this research, messages originated from numerous countries.

Of the 100 e-mail messages collected, as mentioned above, eighteen were discarded, and the remaining 82 were divided according to gender: 46 were written by men, and 36 by women. Therefore, 56.1% of the messages were written by men, and 43.9% by women - a ratio which quite accurately reflects the percentage of female online users reported by Pittaway. (1997:1-2)

The first analysis involved analyzing both groups of messages for the keywords presented by Poynton (1989:69-74) to reflect the different communication styles of females and males. The results are presented in Appendix 1 as the total number of times a particular word appeared in the two groups of messages. For example, the modal 'might' was found four times in the corpus of messages written by females, and nine times in the corpus of messages written by men. Please note that since more messages were written by men, there will have to be an adjustment made to correctly interpret this data.

In order to therefore extrapolate patterns from this data, the following formula was applied to adjust the inherent imbalance of original numbers:

number of female messages : 100 = number of female same word repeats : x

number of male messages : 100 = number of male same word repeats : y

The results of this equation allow several observations based on the collected data. As Poynton (1989:69-74) points out there are different expressions that are more characteristic of women or men - although in the medium of electronic mail some differ from the observations previously reported in this paper:

Men used more modals than females, with the exception of *can*. In fact, males used *could* 2.9 more times, *might* 1.8 more times, and *would* 1.7 more times; while females used *can* 1.3 more times than men. *Should*, *may* and *must* were all used slightly more by men than by women. No instances of *ought* were recorded.

There was some evidence that women use more modal adverbs. However, men and women preferred to use different adverbs: Women used *certainly* 3.8 more times than men, and *probably* 1.9 more times; but men used *possibly* 1.6 more times.

Men and women used the interpersonal metaphor *think* at almost the same rate, but, surprisingly, men used *wonder* in three instances where females were not found using this part of speech at all.

In accordance with Poynton's (1989:69-74) findings, women were by far more polite than men, consistently using *please*, *thank(s)*, *sorry* and *appreciate(d)* many more times than men (1.3, 1.9, 3.5, 3.0 more times respectively), although men used *apologize(d)* 1.5 more times. And men were more assertive than women using *sure* 1.3 more times, while females used *not sure* 2.6 more times. Men also used almost 1.5 more instances of *are* and *is*, but, in an apparent contrast, both genders used the personal pronoun *I* an almost equal amount of times, while males used the more inclusive pronoun *we* almost 1.3 more times.

Only one instance of an evaluative adjective was found with one use of *wonderful* by a female writer, and no instances of *gorgeous* or *delightful* - however, in contrast with expectations, men were more likely to

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make use of expressions of approximation: in fact men used *about* (as an approximant) 6.3 more times, *maybe* 2.7 more times, and *perhaps* 1.6 more times. Only one instance of *approximately* was recorded, also by a male writer.

Rather than there being support for the claim that females make more use of intensifiers, the data collected pointed to a clear gender-based preference over which intensifier is used: men used *very* 1.9 more times than women; and women used *so* (as an intensifier) 1.6 more times than men.

Finally, in contrast to the points made by Poynton (1989:69-74), men used 1.8 more questions and almost the same number of exclamations as women, but used direct quotes 1.5 more times than women. Women and men wrote about the same number of words and pages.

The results of this survey, therefore, strongly challenge the claims put forward by Poynton (1989:69-74). Of the ten points of language use analyzed for, only three were found to support Poynton's claims, while seven were contradictory.

The second analysis undertaken was to identify expressions from both groups which appeared to have an obvious or underlying expression of aggressiveness (Appendix 2) or supportiveness (Appendix 3) . Additionally, samples of language expressing opinions (Appendix 4) were collected from both groups. This second analysis is based on the assumption of a an aggressive/male, supportive/female dichotomy expressed by Herring. (1994:3-4)

From the data collected, there is a clear difference in the language used by males and females online. 'Aggressive' expressions recorded in the messages written by men far outnumbered those written by women - in fact, men used a total of twelve separate aggressive or sarcastic expressions, while women used five. Additionally, men used far more openly aggressive language, including personal attacks and put-downs as well as two references to 'taboo' body parts.

On the other side of the dichotomy, women used far more expressions offering support and a deepening of their relationship with the readers. Men used only six 'supportive' expressions, while women used eighteen. In addition, women used much more open expressions of appreciation and thanks, while men used 'tighter' and less direct expressions.

Furthermore, men were found to be more interested in presenting their personal point of view in order to present an 'authoritative' contribution to the discussion, while women were more interested in the contribution itself.

The results of the second analysis, therefore, strongly support Herring's (1994:3-4) claim of a male/female dichotomy paralleling an aggressive/supportive continuum.

When combined, the results of these two analyses present several interesting conclusions. First of all, there is undeniably a gender difference in styles in e-mail messages posted to electronic discussion groups, and particularly results in the second analysis strongly support the conclusions reached by Herring (1994:3-4): males are more prone to write in an aggressive, competitive style, while women tend to be far more supportive in their writing. The male/female language style dichotomy has been transported into computer communication regardless of the lack of physical contact.

And secondly, the results of the first analysis, which actually provided some contrary information, are to be taken as a caution towards that very method of analyzing data; decontextualizing lexical items removes them from their existing relationship with other lexical items which together form a message - in isolation

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they do little to continue transporting that message.

And finally, rather than contributing to a conclusion, the results point towards the very question posed, but yet unanswered, by this survey: why do men at the end of the twentieth century still prefer an aggressive and dominating use of language in electronic communication which does little to meet the objective of providing and receiving support from fellow members of electronic discussion groups?

The answer, it seems, lies very much in the different approach taken by women and men towards this new electronic technology - an approach which is congruent with the socialization and integration of males and females into society. Men apparently see the opportunity provided by this technology as a chance to further one's own influence, by gaining valuable information and by extending one's own authority and respect in society; while women ostensibly view this technology as an opportunity to nurture existing relationships and develop new ones. Language styles online are different, to a certain extent, because they reflect the different goals of the users.

Appendix 1 // Appendix 2 // Appendix 3 // Appendix 4

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Appendix 1

TOTAL NUMBER OF KEYWORDS FOUND (in 82 e-mail messages)

modals	**MALE**	**FEMALE**
might	9	**4**
could	15	**4**
should	11	**7**
ought	0	**0**
must	5	**3**
can	29	**29**
may	10	**7**
would	30	**14**
modal adverbs	**MALE**	**FEMALE**
possibly	2	**1**
certainly	1	**3**
probably	2	**3**
interpersonal metaphors	**MALE**	**FEMALE**
think	13	10
suppose	0	0
wonder	3	0
polite expressions	**MALE**	**FEMALE**
please	6	**6**
thank(s)	8	**12**
sorry	4	**11**
apologize	2	**1**
appreciate(d)	3	**7**

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statements	**MALE**	**FEMALE**
sure	10	6
not sure	1	2
pretty/quite sure	0	1
is	143	72
are	94	50
I	201	185
we	44	27
evaluative adjectives	**MALE**	**FEMALE**
wonderful	0	1
gorgeous	0	0
delightful	0	0
excellent	2	3
great	12	9
good	15	22
approximation	**MALE**	**FEMALE**
perhaps	4	2
maybe	7	2
about	8	1
around	0	0
approximately	1	0
intensifiers	**MALE**	**FEMALE**
so	7	9
very	19	8
questions / exclamations	**MALE**	**FEMALE**
?	70	31
!	50	34

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length / quotations	**MALE**	**FEMALE**
words	10639	**7466**
lines	1876	**1210**
quote-lines	290	**148**
pages	35	**23**

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Appendix 2

FEMALE AND MALE AGGRESSIVE / SARCASTIC EXPRESSIONS
(from 82 e-mail messages)

MALE	FEMALE
Facts be damned	**I'd rather sit around and watch the paint peel in my apartment.**
Do you understand that?	**I have to disagree..**
You should realize that..	**Sorry, but you'll have to keep trying (smiley face)**
..or do you exist in some alternate reality?	**I tried to reply earlier, but Jeffrey somehow managed to delete it for me:/ Grrr, oh well.**
Go back to the cranial explorations of the upper reaches of your bowels, it suits you.	**Make no mistake about it, the ill-informed and the ignorant are now in charge.**
It is absurd to think..	
Get a life!!!	
Painting with a pretty big brush there, Glen.	
Whoa!! I said nylon HIKING pants! Not rain or warm-up pants!	
I have no intention of 'lightening up' when you continue to make trashy postings.	
Please allow me to drop a pebble into the tranquil discussion on..	
Did you just pull that out of your ass?	
I have a real problem with..	

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Appendix 3

FEMALE AND MALE SUPPORTIVE EXPRESSIONS
(from 82 e-mail postings)

MALE	FEMALE
Life sure is interesting!	**Congratulations to Kim.**
Glad to help.	**I'm sure you CU folks will love her.**
I hope that all concerned will accept this apology for my ill considered words in the previous posting.	**I'm sorry for my glib reference to..**
Have a nice day.	**Thanks for all the tips on..**
Thanks in advance for your help.	**Good point.**
Thanks, buddy.	**Good for Ricki Rudd!**
	Hope this helps!
	I hope that you can help me.
	Any suggestions would be appreciated.
	I agree with you, Paul.
	Should be an interesting scene!
	I envy all of you going to Dearborn.
	I apologize for having to..
	As always, thanks for your support!
	It's a neat cookbook and I can't wait to send it on!
	This is my first posting - thanks for your patience.
	I can't tell you how much it helps to know that I am not the first person to..
	Your replies were most interesting and helpful.

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Appendix 4

MALE AND FEMALE CONTIBUTION OF IDEAS
(some samples only)

MALE	FEMALE
It is my experience after years of teaching..	**I haven't seen it first hand but have heard good things.**
I'm in charge of a...	**I don't think there's a limit..**
That's been my experience.	**It is possible that you can also provide..**
I believe...	**Here's my advice:**
In my opinion,...	**At least, that's what I think it is.**
	..., I think.

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